YOU "SHUT OFF FEELING" OR YOU'RE LOST

By Beatrice Murphy Campbell

The telegram reading, "Your return to duty is authorized," ended four of the most harrowing months of my life. Even then I was lucky. For some people, the ordeal has lasted six months and more. Some have gone through it more than once. Four months was enough for me.

My friends, my family asked, "Aren't you happy?" I didn't know. I still don't. I was too numb to have any feeling. Somewhere in the interim, in order to save my sanity, I reached the point where one must shut off feeling or be lost.

I was not an important Government executive. I was an obscure clerk in a public service agency, the Veterans Administration. There are thousands like me in the Government. No state secrets passed over my desk. The material handled by me and others in my department was mailed daily to the public. Yet "in the best interests of the Government" I had been suspended from my job four months before as a security risk, and forced to grope back through 15 years of my life to prove my innocence.

It all began in November. November 22, 1954, was like any other work day for me except that the spinal arthritis which forces me to wear a plaster cast had been kicking up because of the threatening weather. But November 22 was already a special day in my life.

On that same day 12 years before, I had defied the doctors who told me that I would never work again and had accepted a job in the Government. They shook their heads and gave me three months. I had made it for 12 years.

The price had been high. Plenty of rest had been necessary. Outside activities were cut to the bone, so that even a movie was quite a thrill. Visits with friends became the exception.

Never a joiner, my memberships in organizations dwindled down to one church group which understood that I could not take an active part and another religious organization where attendance was not a requirement. No political affiliations—even of the approved kind. No consorting with left wingers, or right wingers, or any kind of wingers. But I had made it for 12 years.

I was proud of that, and grateful. Every year on this date I performed a private ritual. I offered a special prayer of thanks to God and I called my personal physician—who has attended me for the past 10 years—on the telephone and said, "We've made it for another year." For I realized that only by working as a team had we succeeded.

On November 22, 1954, I never made the call.

It was 15 minutes to closing time at the office, and I had just left the rest room after powdering my face preparatory to going home. Someone said I was wanted in the Division Chief's office. I walked in smiling. He is one of the nicest men I've ever met, and there was no need to fear a call to see him.

There was a stranger with him, the Director of Personnel. He handed me a piece of paper. "Will you sign to acknowledge receipt of this letter?" I looked into his unsmiling face and signed.

He handed me the letter, looked at his watch and announced, "As of this minute, you are suspended from your job. I will escort you back to your desk to pick up your personal belongings. You will turn over your building and other passes, and I will see you out the door of the building."

I was stunned. This was no time to think of the contents of the letter. This was the time to gather strength to keep my head high. A moment of panic seized me, however. "Does every one have to know?"

My division chief, who had not been apprised of the contents of the letter, asked to read it. Then he rose to my defense and asked to accompany me. So all three of us walked back to my desk and I picked up my handbag.

Fifteen years ago I attended two autograph lectures given by two of America's outstanding authors at the Bookshop in question. They were Langston Hughes, the poet, and Erskine Caldwell, the novelist, who brought his publisher with him. I was book reviewer for a group of Negro newspapers, and a budding writer and poet myself. I had a definite interest in authors.

There were so very few places in the Nation's Capital 15 years ago where a Negro could go to hear such personalities. I was thrilled at the opportunity. These were open, public meetings. I went; listened to the speakers; was introduced to them afterward and met the publisher, and I went home refreshed. That was all.

When I was questioned a month before my suspension, it was mentioned that a "friend" gave the information about my supposed membership. Not once in the four months of my suspension was my lawyer or I given the name of that friend.

In the first week of my suspension, my lawyer wrote to the agency asking for particulars. What was the (supposed) definite date of my membership? Who made the charge? And so on. Three days before the expiration of the thirty allowed me for replying to the letter of suspension, he received a letter stating that no information could be given.

Had my lawyer and I been able to pinpoint the date in those two years (1940-1941), we would have been saved much work, worry and expense. But when he pressed for a definite date he was told to "just cover from 1940 on." Try reconstructing 14 years of your life!

We had to collect records without knowing exactly what records we needed. We reasoned that we might find the "friend" through a process of elimination. We would just send affidavits to everyone I had ever known, and the one who failed to respond would be the informer.

It was a tall order, but I tried. I sent out more than 200

affidavits; then I stopped because I ran into the phenomenon of The Great Fear.

Friends I had known for years were afraid to put their names on a piece of paper telling the truth. They did not deny that it was the truth. They freely admitted to me privately that I had never tried to induce them to join, or had even discussed, the Bookshop. But, "I don't want to sign anything. You get in trouble if you sign things. It may be used against you later. Look at so and so!" Or, "I hold a job in the Government. If I sign this, I will be investigated later."

Some returned blank affidavits, afraid even to write their names and addresses in the corner.

This is a real, honest-to-God fear of one American to say a good word for another, a friend.

At first I was angry. I wanted to cut out of my life all these false friends. Then I began to see that the fear was so deep and widespread that it couldn't be dismissed that way. Before it was over, I began to realize that there was a basis for their fear.

I discovered that my suspension had been based not on something I had done, but on a misinterpretation of something I had said on behalf of another. So I stopped being hurt and angry. I stopped feeling at all. I just told myself that when it was all over I would have to sit down and take another look at human values. And over and over I kept repeating to myself the words of my own poem, "Lord, keep me away from bitterness."

But I did get replies and affidavits. I found there were people brave enough to speak for me. We collected more than a hundred from people in all walks of life and from all over the country. I found, also, that there were people, poor like myself, who were willing to dig into their pockets and share what they had, not only to see that I did not go hungry but also to see that I had the money to keep up the fight.

I had to wait three weeks for my last salary check (from

which, incidentally, the last 15 minutes of that suspension day had been subtracted). The check was not mailed to me; I had to go down to the building and stand outside the door while it was brought down to me!

I had to worry about whether the child for whom I had made great sacrifices so that he might have a college education would be permitted to use that training in the services of his Government.

I couldn't look for another job because I already had one. I had been suspended, not dismissed.

I—the perennial saver of papers—spent hours and hours (many of them at night when I couldn't put my head on my pillow) poring over papers and scrapbooks and letters and clippings in search of—what? I didn't know.

I had to go back over 25 years of free lance writing and collect copies of everything I had even written (evidence which was never used; but how could we know?).

My mind kept slipping back to my first day in the Government. America was at war. I couldn't go if I wanted to because of my illness. But one of the things which kept me going through those months when the doctor said I couldn't make it was the feeling that by sticking to this routine job I was doing my bit for my country. I was helping to keep servicemen supplied with the things they needed.

My lawyer asked for a formal hearing. Not until the morning of the hearing were we allowed to see the one piece of admitted evidence against which we had to prepare a defense. But it was evidence which we were able to refute completely by facts so substantial that they could not be disputed.

The evidence? Five years before, I had spent two hours talking with an FBI representative about a friend of mine who was seeking Government employment. She was an admitted member of the Bookshop Association who had resigned in protest when the first pink tinge showed. My son was present at this interview.

At the end of it the FBI man sat down and wrote on a

piece of paper—in his own handwriting and in his own words—a summary of what we had discussed, and asked me to sign it in confirmation. Since the interview had not concerned me at all, there was no need for me to feel apprehension about what he had written. So I signed the paper without reading it.

Not until the paper was presented as evidence did I know that what it said was the FBI man's interpretation of our interview. It read: "I joined the Bookshop with . . . in 1940 in order to take advantage of the discounts."

Without my opening my mouth, every word of the statement was proven false. The friend in question was a witness at the hearing. She said she did not join in 1940, but a year or two earlier, then resigned. When she rejoined in 1941, I was ill in bed, fighting for my life. I never even attended a public meeting with her.

I was able to present medical records to prove that during 1941 I spent 10 weeks in the hospital and four months (including the period when she joined) under the care of a private physician, confined to my home.

Perhaps you think that there was no way for my agency to have all of these medical facts. Under ordinary circumstances, no. But in this case, an emphatic yes.

Three times in eight years—beginning five months before I was hired—my agency demanded complete physical examinations to establish my employability. Three times it obtained medical records from former and present physicians and the hospital. It knew every date.

The charge that I became a member to take advantage of discounts was easy to disprove. It was possible for me to obtain direct from the publishers far greater discounts than those offered by the Bookshop. Any book reviewer receives many more books than he can possibly read, so there was no need to seek ways to obtain more. As a matter of fact, I gave a whole library of children's books to a Catholic settlement house.

My boss and spiritual adviser during the period mentioned in my letter of suspension was a Catholic priest and university professor. He was present at the hearing to say how shocked he was at the charge because of my decidedly negative political attitude. Too, I had just become a Catholic in 1940. How could one embrace catholicism and communism at the same time?

A year or two before my suspension, in the voluminous mail which comes to anyone engaged in book promotion there came two papers. I almost overlooked them because of my practice of putting aside "slush" mail to open when I have time. But the stamps caught my eye (my son collects them) and saw that they came from behind the Iron Curtain.

I took them to work and showed them to my supervisor. We agreed that they should be sent to the FBI. My lawyer was able to turn over to the hearing board two letters from the FBI, signed by J. Edgar Hoover himself, thanking me for turning over the material.

Now I have returned to work. The door I was ushered out of has swung to let me in unattended. I sit at the same desk; do the same work; meet the same people; and life on the surface goes on as before. Only I am different.

Only I see the shadow hanging between me and my fellow workers, most of whom refused—or were afraid—to give even the simple verification that I had never tried to induce them to join the Bookshop.

Only I know that here and there behind a hand someone is saying, "She was suspended for subversive activities," without adding, "They didn't find a thing."

I, alone, must bear the tremendous financial burden, and start once more from scratch.

The words on my personal action sheet restoring me to duty after a "suspension unjustified and unwarranted" come too late to erase the corroding effect of the experience upon my spirit.

In the long stretches of the night, I used to rehearse what I was going to say, after I was cleared, to those who had

ailed me in my hour of need. Then one day it came to me hat while on one hand I was praying to God for help, on he other I was trying to take His business into my own ands. Vengeance is not mine.

It is almost too much to expect that I would not be bitter nd resentful. Yet I know I must keep trying. I must keep raying over and over and over, "Lord, keep me away from itterness."